

The PRESIDENT.—Gentlemen, I hardly know how to express my thanks to you for the very kind demonstration that you have made and for the words that have fallen both from Mr. A. E. Jull, Chairman of the Counties Association of New Zealand, and also from Mr. Parr, Mayor of Auckland, when moving this motion. When the Prime Minister laid upon me, as one of his colleagues, the responsibility of bringing this Conference to fruition, and of placing before it this most important business, I felt that I was undertaking the greatest work that I have attempted during the course of my public life. I then determined that no effort should be wanting on my part in laying before you a true and accurate presentment of the position of our local government in the Dominion as it is, and free from all party feeling. I would like to say that, while a good deal of criticism in various parts of the country was directed against myself for the manner in which the Conference was selected, I am satisfied the result has shown that the method that was adopted of bringing together in the different districts representatives of the local authorities and asking them to select gentlemen who were to come to this Conference has been a unqualified success. It has resulted in producing, if you will excuse me saying so to your faces, the ablest Conference regarding any public question that has ever been assembled in New Zealand. You will not, I feel sure, take it unkindly if I say that even Parliament itself might take a lesson from the methods of the Conference, and from the earnestness and devotion which it has put into the work of local government. The manner in which the position was tackled and the difficulties discussed causes me to feel proud of having had the honour of presiding over the Conference's deliberations. We have shown, gentlemen, that we can grapple with one of the greatest questions that there is to be considered by this country, and the resolutions that you have come to in the course of three days for the purpose of laying down something of a basic character in connection with this controversial subject will, I believe, meet with the approval of the country. You are well aware that this question of local government has been long before the country, but I think we have shown that when it is dealt with by a body of earnest practical men who understand what they want and what is wanted that it is quite capable of solution. The success of the Conference is in the fact that the gentlemen who have come here have had a thorough acquaintance with public and local affairs, and so when issues have been placed before them they have been able at once to grasp them and to decide whether they were good or not. And now let me thank you for the uniform courtesy that has been extended to me throughout these trying three days. We have been worked hard, and yet throughout the whole of our Conference there has not been one discordant note, and on no occasion has the President had to call a delegate to order. That result will stand as a record in connection with public affairs in this country. We realize that the Local Government Bill as submitted to Parliament and the country contains large proposals which must be abandoned; yet I believe that the resolutions which you have passed and the discussion which you have had will enable the Government to understand so far what is wanted by the local authorities that a moderate Bill embodying many reforms can be brought down, and we will be able to prepare a Local Government Bill which, if the Parliament of the country reflects the opinion of the public bodies of New Zealand, will have a chance of being carried on to the statute-book of the Dominion within the next month or two. Now let me say what I think are two of the outstanding features of the work that has been done. The first is that we have come to recognize fully that so far as our great cities are concerned it is quite unnecessary that there should be any interference with them in their domestic concerns. The second is that we realize that so far as counties are concerned the tendency which has been going on for years past of creating more and more counties or of reducing the size of counties must be stopped, and that there should be a Commission of inquiry set up consisting of able men who will go throughout the country and make recommendations for the purpose of enlarging these counties, so that we may get them down to something like forty or fifty in number—great, strong bodies, having an assured finance—and thus practically able to take the place of the proposed Provincial Councils. We shall then have all the vast benefits of that larger system without any duality of power and without any conflict of interest. Now I come briefly to refer to the question of subsidies. Gentlemen, you know the difficulties that have attached for many years to this question of subsidies and roads-and-bridges grants. Most unjustly and improperly the Government—not this Government, because this is a new Government, but other Governments—have been charged with endeavouring to debauch the settlers, and with acting with grave impropriety. Well, I showed you in a moment or two yesterday that in many cases the constituencies which have been represented by Opposition members have received far and away more money than have constituencies represented by members on the Government side of the House, the idea being that the interests of the districts should be studied; but there has been no scientific basis, there has been no settled and definite system, upon which this has been done; and I think if we can from the New South Wales method evolve something like a definite and scientific system, that would be a tremendous benefit. It would then be for the Minister in charge, with the consent of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, to set apart the amount of money to be handed over to the local bodies. In 1911 I think the amount spent on subsidies and grants to local bodies for public works was upwards of half a million of money; so I will, for argument's sake, say, supposing half a million of money were set aside, the subsidies, distributed upon a scientific basis, should be paid over in such a way that the money would be expended on roads and bridges according to the necessities of the various districts. If such a plan as that can be devised the time will have come when the real necessities of the outer districts will be met, and we shall provide decent roads and bridges throughout the country for the purposes of backblock settlement. My colleague and chief, the Prime Minister, is one who has gone about the backblocks of the country in a way no other Prime Minister has ever done, and I may say without the slightest hesitation no one has ever had a more sincere and earnest desire than the Hon. Mr. Mackenzie to place the settlement of the country upon a sound and proper footing. Gentlemen, I have once more most heartily to thank you for the kind way in which you have passed this vote, and, above all, to acknowledge